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"I AM THAT I AM."

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In the third chapter of Exodus we have the record of the call and commission of Moses to bring forth the children of Israel from Egypt, and to lead them to the land of Canaan, to take possession of it, in accordance with the promise made by the Almighty to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The mind of Moses seems to have been filled with doubt, not only with respect to his own ability and fitness for so important an enterprise, but also as to whether the Israelites would receive him. It had been more than two hundred years since Jacob had gone down to the land of Egypt to sojourn. During this time we have no intimation that God had interposed, in any special manner, in behalf of the chosen people. Though they had increased in numbers more rapidly than any other people on the face of the earth, yet, politically, it had gone ill with them. No longer were they free, and allowed to pursue the active vocations of their fathers, laboring for the maintenance of their families and an increase of wealth; but, as serfs, they were soon reduced to the rigors of an Oriental servitude. Under the lash of relentless task-masters they labored from the early morning till the twilight of evening, under an almost tropical sun, making brick, quarrying and cutting stone, erecting to false gods those temples which constitute the pride of the Pharaohs, and are the wonder and admiration of the world to the present day. Though often, by tradition, they had heard that the land of Palestine was their inheritance, and that it was assigned to them by the Omnipotent Creator, yet so long had he tarried in his appearing to put them in possession, while so often, in the solitude of the night, they had sighed for deliverance from their bondage, and dreamed of the sweets of liberty in a land flowing with milk and honey, that it seemed too much for poor frail human nature. Not only no deliverance had come, but additional burdens were laid upon them. Infidelity had taken possession of their hearts. Hence, when the inquiry was made of the Lord who it was that proposed to give them deliverance, what was the name of him who had commissioned the leader to conduct them forth from the land of bondage, the reply was in the forcible language given in the caption of this article, translated, in the authorized English Version, I AM THAT I AM; and in the Septuagint, *Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν*.

There are other reasons, in addition to the one given above, why God on this occasion should announce himself to the chosen people by a new name. Anciently it was customary to give a new name, or an additional title, to individuals when anything remarkable transpired in their history, especially if thereby they sustained a new relation to God or their fellowmen. When God renewed his covenant with Abram, declaring to him that he should be the father of many nations, in token of the great blessing thus conferred upon him, his name was changed to Abraham. When it was made known to Sarai that she would become a mother, and that, through her son, manifold blessings would come to the nations, her name was changed to Sarah. When Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord

and prevailed, he was named Israel. Esau was called Edom—Reuel, Jethro. So with the apostle to whom our Lord gave the surname Peter, a rock; though he did not exhibit fully that he was entitled to such a cognomen till after the resurrection. The leading reason for this change of name—the giving to an individual an additional one—was that names were significant, and served to point out some characteristic or peculiarity of the person, some prominent trait in his character, or some marked event in his history. Since these might occur with finite man, how much more with the infinite and eternal God! Hence his name, among primitive people, became manifold as the different aspects of his all-perfect character were brought to view. When his antecedent eternity and his absolute independence are contemplated, he is called Elohim, the Everlasting. When he was regarded as a personal, a free God, manifesting himself to an intelligent universe by the works of his creative power, he is called Jehovah, the Author of all things that exist. When his attributes which pre-eminently set him above all created beings come into view, his name is El 'Elion, the Most High God. Or if his omnipotence is clearly set before the mind, his name is El Shaddai, the Almighty. But again, Moses had no need to ask the name by which God was commonly known. He was a worshipper of the true God, and hence he must have known the title usually applied to him by his people. God had, from time to time, announced himself to the ancestry of Moses, and therefore, in putting the question, did not have reference to any of the former names of God. Hence the name, in the conception of Moses, was the title which the present aspect of God toward his people would most clearly designate the new relation; or in other words, "What is the principle of thy being or movement of thy will which is now to display itself to thy people?"

Prof. Bush says, "The people were well aware, by tradition, that, whenever God had been pleased to honor any of their ancestors with a new revelation, it was his wont to assume a new characteristic denomination, expressive mainly of that attribute which served as a security for the fulfillment of the promise. Moses took it for granted that, on an occasion so momentous as the present, they would expect the announcement of some new and appropriate name which should carry in its import a kind of pledge for the performance of all that he was pleased to promise." Prompt is the Lord in meeting this new difficulty which presented itself to the mind of Moses. An immediate reply is a new name, differing in some respects, in meaning, from all his former titles—a name making himself known *to be*, by giving *being* to the promise made to Abraham centuries before. Thus Moses is assured that the Israelites will soon find that God *is* by the acts which he will perform in their behalf; hence the infidelity of their hearts will be removed, and they will settle down into a calm, serene faith, which leans upon the promises of a covenant keeping God. Farther, the use of the first person expresses a sentiment that will animate the people with a new hope and a firm resolution. It is not, therefore, a mere name, but a "word of moral power fitted to stir the heart and meet the present occasion."

If the above sentiment be correct, then the English expression of the name, *I am that I am*, is not correct. This any being can truthfully affirm of itself. It is merely a declaration that God is what he is; but it gives no information as to what he is. Surely such an expression applied to the Creator is trivial. By biblical scholars it has been rendered in two ways: First, *I AM*, because I am; sec-

ond, *I am that which I am*. The English Version, I AM THAT I AM, probably means the same as the second. A serious objection to this is, it takes a whole sentence to be the name. Upon a careful examination, it seems to me that the first word, EHYEH—I AM—is the name, and the latter part of the sentence renders a reason for, and points out the appropriateness of, the name. That the first word is the name, and that the other two form no part of it, is evident from the latter part of the verse, “Thus shalt thou say unto the sons of Israel, EHYEH—I AM—hath sent me unto you.” Another objection is that it lays stress upon that which is no part of the name, thus confusing the idea. Such an idea as *I am that I am*, declared on so important an occasion by the Almighty and Ineffable God, was not fitted to implant confidence in Israel, or produce persuasion in their minds. Again, the sentence thus translated does not express the idea of EHYEH, which is the name given in the last part of the verse. This view of the subject affords good sense. It finds in the answer of God the new name and the reason for it. The sense is the same, whether we translate *asher* since, for, or because. Another advantage is that, in the two parts of the verse, it gives the same name, and in each the same sense. My name is I AM, for I am. This translation comports with the Hebrew structure and with the Massoretic pointing. The Massorites seem thus to have understood it; for a pause is inserted by them after the first word.

A critical examination of the verb *haya* will show that, when an intelligent being is the subject, it does not refer to abstract existence, but to the being as active and obvious to the senses. This is well illustrated by its use in GEN. I., 2, which is thus rendered by Dr. Murphy, “And the earth had become a waste and a void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was brooding upon the face of the water.” The verb is in the perfect tense, and hence denotes that the confusion and emptiness had run their course and become a settled thing. According to the idiom of the Hebrew language, even if the verbs were not expressed, the sentence would be complete, and would be rendered, “And the land was waste and void;” but with the verb expressed, it means something more, and hence the propriety of translating it, “had become.” It implies that the land which first came under the cognizance of primeval man may not always have been a scene of desolation, but that some catastrophe had brought about such a state, and that there was a time in which it progressed, but its course had run when the Spirit of God was brooding over it as described by the sacred penman. The sentence, therefore, does not describe the condition of the land when it was first created, but only intimates a change that may have taken place after its creation. The verb applied to the Eternal does not imply absolute beginning, or any essential change of being, but, in engaging in a new course of action, as manifesting the agent to have being. But the form *Ehyeh*, is future. It denotes the incipient stage of an action, and means “*I go to be*,” that is, I am about to prove myself *to be* by an action which is noticeable. With respect to the chosen people, heretofore I have *promised*; but now, I am going to *perform*—going to fulfill my promise. The verb ought to be the first person, for the speaker is naming himself, and with all the emphasis of his personal identity. Taking this view of the subject under consideration, “it is obvious that this was a strikingly significant and appropriate name for Moses to bear to the people, as it announced a present God, come down to fulfill his covenant and perform his

promise to the afflicted descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Prof. Bush, in his comment upon this name, says, “It properly denotes the undivided, eternal, and unchangeable existence of the great Being to whom it is applied, carrying in it also the implication that he, in distinction from all others, is the one only true God who really *is*. It implies, moreover—as founded upon the immutability of the Divine nature—the certain and faithful performance of every promise which he had uttered, so that whatever he had bound himself by covenant to do for Abraham, for Isaac, and for Jacob, he pledges himself, by the annunciation of this august title, to make the same good to their seed.”